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RECENT CHURCH UNION MOVEMENTS IN CANADA

DANIEL JAMES FRASER

MONTREAL

Three recent movements in Canada towards a clearer expression of Christian unity have special significance—the co-operation of the Theological Colleges affiliated to McGill University, the organization of the Church Unity League, and the negotiations for the organic union of the Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian Communion.

(1) Montreal College Co-operation. The latest calendar of the co-operating Theological Colleges contains this general statement: "Four Theological Colleges are affiliated to McGill University, namely, the Congregational, the Diocesan, the Presbyterian, and the Wesleyan. Ever since their foundation these Colleges have taken advantage of the classes in the University for training their students in the Arts subjects required of candidates for the ministry, and the results have been so satisfactory as to encourage the idea of extending the sphere of co-operation.

"Early in the year 1912 careful investigation was made by representatives of the four Colleges into the requirements of their several theological curricula with a view to ascertaining what subjects, if any, could be taken in common classes. As a result of prolonged consideration and negotiation it was unanimously agreed that a large portion of the work which had hitherto been done separately by each of the Colleges could be taken profitably in joint classes without prejudice to the principles

of the Communions represented and with increased efficiency in the work.

"The authorities of the four Colleges accordingly offered for the session of 1912-1913 a series of intercollegiate lecture courses from which each College might select according to the requirements of its own curriculum. The co-operative plan which was inaugurated in October, 1912 . . . has been abundantly justified by the results."

This movement has no immediate connection with any proposed plan of organic church union and does not involve even a "federation" of the Colleges participating. Each College still retains its individuality, its autonomy—appointing its own professors and conferring its own degrees—and its responsibility to the church which it represents. Nor does it involve any change in the relation—loosely defined as "affiliation"—of the Theological Colleges to McGill University. It is simply the co-operation on the ground of expediency of four independent self-governing Divinity Schools. It is an outward expression of the mutual good-will which is a tradition of this collegiate group, a witness to the public of the non-sectarian character of theological scholarship, and an effort to avoid the waste of overlapping, for example, in class-work and library equipment. What the future has in store for the movement—in the way of union or federation or of larger recognition by the University of theological courses in its requirements for degrees—is a thing of pure conjecture. No plans have been officially considered by any of the authorities concerned. It is possible that the study of theology in a scientific spirit will, as a result of its manifestation in the co-operative movement, affect the constituencies of both the Colleges and the University; but whatever happens will likely be the result of normal growth, not of arbitrary manufacture.

That there is real co-operation is evident from two considerations. First, the Colleges offer intercollegiate courses in such a wide range of subjects as Old and New Testament Literature and Exegesis, Church History, History of Doctrine, Patristics, Comparative Religion, Philosophy and Psychology of Religion, Christian Ethics, Systematic Theology, Homiletics, and Pastoral Training including Pedagogics and Sociology. Secondly, while the four Colleges require on the part of all their students in the three years of theological study 168 hours per week in the joint classes, they reserve for denominational teaching only 17 hours. With the exception of the Diocesan (Anglican), the Colleges reserve no subjects in the first and second years and only one subject each in the third year. Even this small reservation is made in no sectarian spirit, for it is practically necessary that students take up in separate classes the "rules and forms of procedure" of their several Communion.

This educational co-operation which involves 16 professors and about 200 students is now completing its third year and seems to have safely passed the experimental stage. The enthusiastic financial support of the movement by the laity of all the Churches, the comparative ease with which it was inaugurated, and the unbroken harmony of its internal progress, indicate that Canada is good soil for the seed of unity. This conclusion is confirmed by the success of more recent attempts at similar co-operation by the groups of Divinity Schools affiliated to the provincial Universities of Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia.

(2) The Church Unity League. Early in 1913 an appeal on behalf of Christian Unity, prepared by a few Anglican clergymen, was sent to the clergy and laity of the Church of England in Canada, inviting signatures for its presentation to the House of Bishops. The appeal referred *inter alia* to the deliverance of the Lam-

beth Conference (1908) on Church Unity, the summons of the Edinburgh Conference (1911), and the necessity of recognizing in some definite way the manifest Christian experience of the Reformed Non-Episcopal Churches. For promoting the cause of unity two practical steps were recommended—the admission of ministers of other churches, under certain restrictions and by rightful authority, to the pulpits of the Church of England, and permission to members of other communions on occasion to communicate in the Church of England. The appeal was approved and signed by nearly 300 clergymen and about 1,000 laymen.

This encyclical at once drew forth the following pronouncement from the (ten) Bishops of Eastern Canada: “While earnestly desirous of promoting the visible unity of the Church, they [the Bishops] deeply regret the publication of the circular in question, believing that such unauthorized action will inevitably hinder rather than promote the cause of real and lasting unity.

“While recognizing the right of every Churchman to hold and maintain his own views in things non-essential, they regard the specific proposals of the circular as calculated to subvert the Church’s historic order, to imperil her internal harmony, and to retard the progress of her legitimate work.

“They admonish the brethren, clergy and laity alike, not to act precipitately and to beware lest in their desire to come closer to their brethren in non-episcopal Communion they weaken the bonds by which the Church of England in Canada is united to the Anglican Communion throughout the world.”

In spite of this admonition, however, and within a month of its deliverance, the signatories of the appeal met and organized “The Church Unity League”; the objects of which are: “(a) to promote by all constitutional means the cause of Christian Unity, and (b) to examine

and set forth by meetings, sermons, and literature the grounds upon which our divisions rest, and to discover the lines of demarcation between those things that are always and everywhere essential and those that are expedient." No mention is made in the Constitution of the two practical suggestions in the original appeal which were disapproved by the Bishops, and the method of campaign is evidently that of prayer and conference with the representatives of other churches. Even this quiet propaganda, however, is not to be despised, for mutual understanding is a fundamental requisite of friendly co-operation, and the scientific study of the origins of our present forms and especially of the early Church forms is the surest way to dispose of the divine-right idea, which is one of the most serious obstacles to union. It is manifestly inconsistent that we pray for unity and piously deplore our "unhappy divisions," while we cherish dogmatic prepossessions—or obsessions—of Episcopacy or Presbytery as constituting the *esse* of the Christian Church. A multitude of Church Unity Leagues throughout Canada, following the method of honest study, friendly conference, and common intercession can hardly fail to be a wonderful influence in promoting interdenominational comity and co-operation.

(3) Of all recent church union movements in Canada, however, there stands out pre-eminently the proposed plan for the organic union of the Congregational, Methodist, and Presbyterian Communions. The beginnings of the movement go back to 1902 and were almost casual in their nature. The late Principal Patrick, of Manitoba College, with two other delegates, conveyed the greetings of the Presbyterian General Assembly to the General Conference of the Methodist Church then in session at Winnipeg. Without consulting either of his colleagues, Dr. Patrick, a Scotchman of two years' residence in Canada, decided on the spur of the moment to press the

subject of organic union. In response to his appeal the Conference appointed a Committee on Union to meet with representatives of the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches. The Congregational Union, which as early as 1887 had affirmed the readiness of its churches to enter into any movement in the direction of union "consistent with what they believe to be the New Testament principle of righteousness and freedom," and the Presbyterian General Assembly, which since 1899 had had a "special Committee on co-operation with other churches," accepted the Methodist invitation; and since 1903 joint meetings of the official representatives of these three churches have frequently been held.

The idea of union was no novel one to any of the negotiating churches. "The Congregational Union of Canada" is a title that speaks for itself. "The Methodist Church of Canada," which dates in its present form from 1884, is the result of two or three previous unions between such bodies as the Wesleyan Methodists, the Methodist New Connexion, the Methodist Episcopal, the Primitive Methodists, and the Bible Christians. "The Presbyterian Church in Canada" is the result of six unions whose history can be traced intelligently only by an expert student of the manifold divisions of Scottish Christianity. As early as 1817 the Associate or Burgher Presbytery of Truro united with the General Associate or Anti-Burgher Presbytery of Pictou—an action by the way that was almost immediately imitated by the parent sects in Scotland. Later on Presbyteries that stood for the principle of voluntaryism joined forces with those that conformed to establishment, United Secession and Relief Churches buried their obsolete differences, Free and United Presbyterian bodies abandoned the folly of perpetuating in this new land Scottish traditions that are meaningless here, until in 1875 was consummated the union of all its parts in "The

Presbyterian Church in Canada." None of the three Communion, therefore, inherited prepossessions unfavorable to the idea of organic union.

In 1908 there resulted from the negotiations a series of documents as a proposed Basis of Union under the five heads, Doctrine, Polity, Ministry, Administration, and Law. The last two do not concern our purpose here. Under "Ministry" the matter of greatest interest is "The Relations of a Minister to the Doctrines of the Church." In the Congregational Church no creed-subscription is required from a candidate for the ministry. Before his ordination he makes a statement of his belief to a Council or Association of local congregations, and the living faith of the church in the community is made the test of his doctrinal fitness for the office. In the Methodist Church the candidate is examined at an early stage of his student career in the Sermons and Notes of John Wesley and the Twenty-five Articles which are selections from the Anglican Thirty-nine. His ordination vows are connected with experience and practice rather than doctrinal beliefs. In the Presbyterian Church there is required an apparently rigid subscription to the Westminster Confession as a subordinate standard. "Do you believe the Westminster Confession of Faith, as adopted by this Church in the Basis of Union, to be founded on and agreeable to the Word of God, and in your teaching will you faithfully adhere thereto?" Various methods of casuistry are resorted to in order to mitigate the severity of this ordination test. The phrase "as adopted by this Church in the Basis of Union" sometimes affords relief, for it is commonly understood that there was a tacit understanding in 1875 between the Old Kirk liberals and the Canada Presbyterian conservatives that large liberty should be allowed in interpreting the Confession, and it was partly on this ground that the heresy-

charge against the late D. J. Macdonnell of Toronto was dropped. Again it is represented that only acceptance of the system of theology embodied in the Confession is required and that departure from many detailed statements is not forbidden. Moreover, the tolerant spirit of the Presbyterian Church is evident from the fact that the General Assembly has never disciplined a Professor or minister in the interests of orthodoxy. At the same time many a sensitive candidate for ordination finds himself in an embarrassing position. If he gives unqualified assent to the prescribed questions, he doubts his loyalty to absolute intellectual integrity; and if he gives a qualified assent, he seems to cast reflection on the sincerity or enlightenment of his "fathers and brethren." For many years there has been widespread dissatisfaction with a subscription that worries consciences even that are not finical at the solemn moment of ordination, that involves the appearance at least of lowering one's moral standard for entrance to the ministry and that gives to many outsiders the impression either of obscurantism or insincerity.

The compromise effected in the proposed Basis would seem to meet fairly well the needs of all the Churches. "Candidates shall be examined in the statement of Doctrine of the United Church and shall before ordination satisfy the examining body that they are in essential agreement therewith, and that as ministers of the Church they accept the statement as in substance agreeable to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures." The questions at ordination which bear on this are: "Are you persuaded that the Holy Scriptures contain sufficiently all doctrines required for eternal salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ? And are you resolved out of the said Scriptures to instruct the people committed to your charge and to teach nothing which is not agreeable thereto?" The terms of this subscription would

seem to allow standing-room in the ministry of the United Church for men of differing attitudes to questions of inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy of the Bible.

The statement of "Polity" is practically Presbyterian. This was to be expected, for it involves least compromise. The Congregationalists of Canada have never followed the system of Independency and are not really more Congregational than either of the other negotiating churches. With all due deference to Presbytery, the congregations of the Presbyterian Church have practical autonomy, and the same is true, perhaps to a slightly lesser degree, of the Methodist congregations. Moreover, the Wesleyans of Canada follow the Presbyterian order of government as their colleagues in the United States follow the Episcopal. Evidently then to the satisfaction of all, the professed aim of the Joint Committee on the question of Polity has been realized, namely, to "provide substantial congregational freedom and at the same time secure the benefits of a strong connexional tie and co-operative efficiency."

The statement of "Doctrine" contains twenty articles, and both in form and content is a palpable compromise. The form indeed seems to involve on the part of the Congregationalists not so much compromise as capitulation. They pressed earnestly for a brief and simple creed, but received scant sympathy from the overwhelming majority; and solely in the interest of union, which for the time being was the supreme interest, they yielded what they regarded almost as a sacred trust, knowing as they did that many in the other Communion sympathized with their view and hoping that ultimately that reasonable view would prevail. Their disappointment is expressed in subsequent resolutions placed on the records of their Union. "We believe that any summary of Christian doctrine of the United

Church should be simpler than the proposed statement and should lay greater emphasis on Christian experience and conduct. . . . We consider that the distinctive elements we are called upon to contribute are simplicity of creed, liberty of terms of subscription, and local responsibility of the individual church. . . . We regret that nothing has been done in the direction of a simpler creedal statement, but express the hope that the door is not yet closed against the possibility of such action."

The statement places in the forefront the doctrine of the Trinity. "We worship Him in the unity of the Godhead and the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, three Persons, of the same substance, equal in power and glory." The United Church, then, according to A. V. G. Allen in his *Christian Institutions* (page 327), will be a branch of the "catholic" Church in the authoritative sense of the term. "According to this decree (of 380 A.D.) the Nicene Doctrine of the co-equality of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost is declared to be the Catholic Faith. Those who accept this faith are alone to enjoy the privilege of being known as Catholics. . . . Efforts to appropriate this renowned historical designation in the interests of some restricted view of the Church, whether of its usage or its organization, whether in ancient days or in our own, have no value and certainly no prestige compared with the definition which gave a new foundation for Christian society." Like the reformers, then, of the sixteenth century, the compilers of this Basis, not necessarily with a conscious intention, have preserved the ancient technical charter of catholicity. The catholicity of the United Church, in the popular sense of the term, must be judged by Article XIV: "We acknowledge as a part, more or less pure, of this universal brotherhood, every particular Church throughout the world which

professes faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to Him as Divine Lord and Saviour."

The traditional difference between the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches on the problem of determinism and free will has always been one largely of emphasis. The metaphysical dispute has practically disappeared from modern religious discussion, and from the pulpits of both Churches is preached on occasion the scriptural doctrine of election as a missionary vocation, an election not to privilege but to service, not to be exclusively saved but to save others. The Calvinistic bold doctrine of absolute predestination and the Arminian doctrine of foreordination based on foreknowledge find no place in this proposed Basis, and Article VI leaves a member still free to grapple with the everlasting philosophical antinomy: "We believe that God in His own good pleasure gave His Son a people, an innumerable multitude chosen in Christ unto holiness, service, and salvation." Or again, Article III: "We believe that the eternal, wise, holy, and loving purpose of God embraces all events, so that while the freedom of man is not taken away nor is God the author of sin, yet in His providence He makes all things work together in the fulfilment of His sovereign design and the manifestation of His Glory." The wording of these articles, however, reveals that the compilers had the old dispute in the background of their minds.

There are evidences that the compilers did not always find it an easy task to "mediate" between the traditional and scientific theologies. Take, for instance, Article V: "Of the Sin of Man." Its prescientific account of the origin of sin, its pathological view of human nature, and its crude statement of human solidarity, represent a distinct victory for the traditionalists. "We believe that our first parents, being tempted, chose evil, and so fell away from God and came under the power of sin, the

penalty of which is eternal death; and that by reason of this disobedience all men are born with a sinful nature, that we have broken God's law, and that no man can be saved but by His grace."

As a further indication of the theological temper of the compilers, take Article VII: "We believe in and confess the Lord Jesus Christ, the only mediator between God and Man, who, being the Eternal Son of God, for us men and our salvation became truly man, being conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, yet without sin. . . . For our redemption He fulfilled all righteousness, offered Himself a perfect sacrifice on the cross, satisfied divine justice, and made propitiation for the sins of the whole world."

These documents were sent down in 1909 to the members of the three Churches for acceptance, rejection, or suggestion of changes. A few negligible suggestions of minor changes were made, and the result of the voting was as follows:

	<i>Congregational</i>	<i>Methodist (Members and adherents)</i>	<i>Presbyterian (Members only)</i>
Number of qualified voters . . .	11,253	344,590	297,619
Percentage voting	33	78	55
Percentage of those voting who favored union	71	87	69
Percentage of qualified voters who expressly favored union . . .	26	68	38

The Congregational Union and the Methodist General Conference declared their willingness to go forward immediately to the consummation of the proposed organic union; but the Presbyterian General Assembly, in view of the strong minority and in keeping with its previous assurance that "a union to be real and lasting must carry the consent of the entire membership," invited the other Churches to continue negotiations in the hope of being able within a few years to reach a definite

conclusion. This invitation was accepted; and meantime a statement of the whole case is being sent down to the members of the Presbyterian Church for their final decision on the present proposal. A favorable vote, however, approaching anything like unanimity, is rendered improbable by the recent formation and aggressive activity of a committee for "the preservation and continuance of the Presbyterian Church in Canada"—a committee that already has a membership of 126 ministers and 448 laymen.

The real opposition, then, to the proposed organic union comes from the Presbyterians, and a brief analysis of their opposition may shed some light on the situation. Allowance must be made, of course, for a large number of qualified voters who are indifferent to ecclesiastical and theological questions. They are willing to take the word of their "spiritual advisers" on these high matters! But of the 45 per cent who did not use their voting privilege, many have no desire, certainly no enthusiasm, for the proposed change; and only the serious-minded will be considered in this attempted analysis.

In the first place, there are the irreconcilable traditionalists. They repudiate the suggestion that they believe in the divine right of Presbytery and they claim to be the spiritual descendants of the Scottish reformers who fought against all ecclesiastical—and for that matter political—tyranny based on *jus divinum*. But their appeal to the system of Presbytery as historically ideal shows that they are practically in bondage to ancestral ecclesiastical forms, while their eulogies of the logically consistent and comprehensive system of Westminster doctrine convey the impression that for them the Confession of Faith possesses finality. This uncompromising element, however, is not taken as seriously by others as by itself. It is frequently said by those instinctively out of sympathy with the proposed union that if any-

thing could make them vote in its favor it would be the bad arguments of these opponents.

In the second place, there are those—found chiefly among the ministers—who constitute what may be called for want of a better term the “liberal” element in the opposition. They feel that the doctrinal burden of the proposed Basis will be heavier than that of the Westminster Confession. They are quite content to give assent to the ancient creeds or the reformed confessions as symbols of the Catholic faith, as the banner about which the champions of truth and freedom rallied, so long as they are allowed liberty to interpret them in their historic setting; but they cannot work up any enthusiasm for a modern statement of Christian belief which is so largely an apparent compromise between systems that have had their day and ceased to be. Why suggest the old theological controversies in a working theory of life for today? Why not let Calvin and Arminius—to say nothing of our First Parents—rest in peace? Or why be compromising on questions of scientific and historic study? Should a pre-Christian Semitic poem of the origin of evil be set down in cold prose as binding on the Christian intellect in the twentieth century? Should a doctrine of the Fall of Man be put forth in a form that conflicts with the scientific theory of evolution? Is a child born with a sinful nature? If so, is it because of the sin of Adam and Eve? Are the Miraculous Conception and the Virgin Birth of the essence of the Christian faith? If they are lacking in our highest Christology, that of the Fourth Gospel, are they necessary to a modern statement? Should not the Church unequivocally allow reverent investigation of these high themes? Did Christ make satisfaction in the forensic sense for the sins of the world? Why not give a doctrine of Atonement which preserves the scriptural and universally human principle of vicarious suffering and

which will be intelligible to those brought up in the atmosphere of evolutionary thought? A Canadian Professor of theology was recently dismissed from his chair ostensibly on the ground that he was not loyal in his teaching to the letter of his Church's creed. If there is a disposition to curtail liberty of interpreting ancient and reformed documents, shall we not be expected to give a rigid allegiance to the *ipsissima verba* of a modern statement? Such a statement, then, should be brief and fundamental, religious rather than theological, and devoid of reference to matters of controversy. The proposed doctrinal Basis appeals neither to the head nor to the heart of a large number of ministers and thoughtful laymen in the Presbyterian Church.

But these are not the only elements in the opposition. There are, in the third place, a great many silent folk who are governed by sentiment rather than by reason. Church loyalty, like patriotism, is not always rational. Many private members have an instinctive reluctance to merging their Church in this big union, although their feeling is hardly articulate. They are almost bewildered by the enthusiasm of their leaders in planning the sacrifice of their Church's identity. This, they feel, ought at best to be a last resort. They would rather have its individuality preserved in a more comprehensive scheme of co-operation. They doubt if a larger federation, including the Anglicans and the Baptists, would be brought any nearer by the proposed organic union. They are not very enthusiastic over some of the militant leaders of the Methodist Church. The recent attacks on Dr. George Jackson and Dr. George Coulson Workman—the latter a distinguished Old Testament scholar—left an impression of dogmatic intolerance of scientific investigation, scribal literalism, a lack of human kindness, and a certain almost cynical indifference to causing public scandal. The expediency of the union move-

ment has not been made quite clear to them. The problem of overlapping could surely be tackled first by a generous and statesmanlike policy of co-operation. Several missionary superintendents deprecate the charge of waste owing to sectarian rivalry in the western fields. In any case, if we cannot work side by side in a friendly spirit, are we capable of having any useful part in an organic union? Besides, is not the urgent need of all our churches that of intensive development? In missionary, educational, and social effort, are our present organizations really effective? If not, shall we secure an efficient by adding three inefficients? Perhaps our first duty is to concentrate on deepening spiritual life and perfecting methods in our own Communion, that we may become capable of making a distinctive and worthy contribution to such a union as is proposed. The policy of union is sometimes advocated as one almost of pessimism regarding the present situation. But we cannot create a new spirit by changing external forms. The Christian spirit in the lives of its members will make any Church, however defective its system, a really efficient instrument of service. Denominational effort born of devotion to specific tasks, missionary zeal, forgetfulness of self in the cause of humanity, will assuredly cultivate the spirit of unity with all others engaged in the same high and generous aims, and the spirit of unity will inevitably result in corporate union of some sort. But many who cherish the sense of unity feel that in view of present conditions in Canada the best contribution they can make to whatever permanent and effective union the future has in store for them is to devote themselves amid the congenial environment of their own Church to the actual work which that Church has at hand to do. Now this may be the result of native timidity or a conservative temperament, but it is not necessarily sectarianism.